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ABSTRACT

Public broadcasting and educational television are struggling to define themselves. Public broadcasting represents our common search for meaning through our efforts at forming and experiencing images. The brief declaration for "freedom" and "imagination" written by Congress into the public broadcast law forms a symbolic utterance expressing the spirit of democratic man as the creative seeker of meaning. The greatest danger to this spirit comes from the broadcast organizations themselves, and the danger of institutionalization and bureaucratization. Perhaps an answer to this is continual examination of how public broadcasting is meeting the public interest. But it is insufficient to say the public interest consists in what is interesting. Neither can we claim the public interest is simply a fair representation of various idealogies. To all of these must be added the need for philosophical and spiritual inquiry, to produce sights generative of insights. (MG)

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REFLECTIONS ON VALUES IN PUBLIC TELEVISION
And their Relationship to Political and Organizational Life

by
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I joined educational television ten years ago and soon found myself drawn into a fascinating web of ideologies and contradictions. Hot confrontations between managers and producers, elitists and populists, localists and centralists, moral idealists and economic determinists, moved like an annual lava flow from one second-rate hotel to another.

Today, the same debates go on, but the quality of the hotels has significantly improved. This is a sign of educational television's increased importance — an escalation from family quarrel to national issue. The scale of magnitude has changed, but there are the same ancient ritualized struggles. The search for the Treasure. Death stalking Everyman (this year, set with great originality at a Miami broadcasters convention).

Ten years from now I hope to be around to participate in those rituals and gnaw away at the old knots. This is not a fatalistic renunciation, rather a belief that public television is struggling with the kind of questions which have no final answers. Questions of value and meaning.

An institution is a person writ large or, if you prefer, society writ small. The same standards apply. We ask that it be authentic, that it stand for something, and that it make a healthy, affirmative contribution to the greater whole. The "asking" generates the struggle.

Ordinary experience teaches us that all birth is accompanied by struggle and pain. The same might be said about death. One of the most perplexing tasks of citizenry is to know whether something is coming in or going out.

Is public broadcasting dying or being born? Unquestionably, these are anxious times for public broadcasting. Rumors of fiscal and political apocalypse are on the lips of those who know, as well as those who don't. Public statements and private memoranda are full of disagreements about goals and methods, but these are often edged with a white-hot moral fury. Even successful funding will not quiet the alarm.

Viewed positively, the alarms of this year have not only roused public broadcasting to face danger but have also awakened its own dormant nature. As public broadcasters discover their enemies they also discover themselves. For the enemy is within as well as without. What appear to be logical opposites nestle quite comfortably, as it turns out, within a single bosom. The democrat must occasionally envy the power of the totalitarian, as the avowed pluralist yearns for the orderly world of the centralist. The value conflicts have never been more sharply drawn, leading to the hope that each public broadcaster will evolve a clearer sense of purpose and meaning.

This struggle for meaning, multiplied to the institutional level, defines an essential purpose of public broadcasting itself. That purpose is to assist us in discovering

meaning in our existence. This search for meaning is one stubborn aspect of our humanity, and the belief that we all have a right to participate in the search is the essence of democracy.

The roots of public broadcasting reach back to the most ancient lines of human activity devoted to formal visual and aural expressions of ideas and feelings. Public television is a visualization of human experience which, through the structure of image and symbol, inevitably presents an organization of meaning. Just as each human cell contains a totality of information about the larger organism, even the smallest segment of a broadcast carries within it the seeds of the whole culture. In decoding this visualization we reveal not only a description of the temporal order of things, but we also lay bare the foundations of our philosophical and political order.

It is no coincidence that the emergence of public television has been accompanied by a surging critical analysis of all television. And not simply because of the few good examples which have been set. Even in its present weakened state, public television is producing profound consequences which will be felt in the most unlikely places for years to come. The impact is caused by a change in consciousness resulting from the fact that, for the first time, Americans can see the broadcast experience in a full moral and political context. This consciousness began to evolve as soon

as the word "public", with all it's ancient symbolic meaning, was linked to television.

The numb resignation to established practices of image manipulation and distortion was based in an acceptance of "little" lies and fantasies as a necessary by-product of the merchandising process. Commercial broadcasting was set firmly within the rules of the economic game. The excesses and stupidities could be deplored, and although they were done to us, we did not do them. Now, what has been a matter of private vice has become a question of public virtue. Public broadcasting is of, by, and for us. It is man showing his image to man. In the anxiety over funding and institutional permanence, it is easy to overlook the source of the real power which lies in the symbolism of public broadcasting. That symbol suggests our common search for meaning through our effort of forming and experiencing images; it infers all that is hidden but possible in the fusion of strong political and aesthetic values. What makes the symbol so compelling is that the conscious wording only hints at the mysterious dynamics waiting to be revealed.

The brief declarations for "freedom" "imagination" and "initiative" written by Congress into the public broadcast law are explosive far beyond what could have been intended. More than up-beat words, they form a symbolic utterance expressing the spirit of democratic man as the creative seeker of meaning. "Imagination" suggests the original

act of conceiving new images and ideas. "Freedom," the political condition in which this imagination may flourish. "Initiative" declares a faith in the self-generated search as the appropriate beginning steps toward a community of values. Public television has been set into the framework of public philosophy which carries with it some notion of justice, the good society, and the life of the spirit. Public broadcasting symbolizes the common enterprise of envisioning the good society. In this, it carries the complex American mixture of the sacred and secular.

The imagination is consecrated ground. It is where the spirit freely plays. It is there, unthreatened, that the spirit can picture itself to itself in an endless variety of modes. It is the place of reflection, insight, the seat of conscience and vision. It is where we <u>see</u> what we <u>mean</u>. No wonder at the unending difficulties in creating a worldly political framework for this realm. What is said in this framework connects the life of the individual mind to the body politic. Totalitarians and bureaucrats can usually find a lot to say. Democratic man is slower, more perplexed, having learned painfully that what is left unsaid is often more important than what is declared. And that freedom lives in the chinks and flaws of the armoured and protective psyche.

That politics is everything, and that politics is nothing are two fatal illusions. It is as foolish to insist that public broadcasting be kept out of politics as it is

dangerous to demand that it be a representative instrument of politics. The political safeguarding of a public broadcast institution characterized by freedom, imagination, and initiative can be accomplished best by not relying completely on politics. Part of the burden should be carried by philosophy.

It has been said that philosophy is dead. And that politics are dead. Art is also supposed to be dead. A recent theory holds that even Science is coming to an end. Only large-scale organization is left. A political solution for public broadcasting is insufficient because many of the problems lie outside of true political life. They exist within organizational life. We can fight politics with politics. What has aroused concern for public broadcasting has been the threats to its freedom and independence. We like to fight on familiar ground and nothing raises the blood in democratic man like the scent of a political tyrant. The tyranny of organization is not such an easy target. In the longer run, perhaps the greatest threats to freedom, imagination, and initiative come from the broadcast organizations themselves. Not because they have to do with broadcasting, but because they are organizations and corporations.

The trouble with organizations is that they are highly resistant to political behavior from both within and without. It is a stinging paradox that institutions which programmatically deal with democratic values are often organized in an authoritarian and undemocratic way. Because what it

does is not private and particular, but public and general, the public broadcast organization even gives the appearance of being a political institution. The appearance continues to deceive many good persons, perhaps because the reality is as terrifying as it is complex. The truth is that many of these organizations attempt to serve the public interest without being politically responsible. They lack a genuine mandate. This is not necessarily damning since they might exercise moral responsibility, which is as valuable as political responsibility. However, moral responsibility is almost a contradiction in organizations. In fact, it is an amorality which is the sustaining energy of corporate life. The very lack of binding human conscience and spirit is what enables organizations to go on and on regardless of changes in values. Organizations do have a heart. The heart is the capital investment. That heart beats on when all else is lifeless suggests the ascending of managers, accountants and lawyers over the creative image-makers. Politics, even better internal and external systems of political representation, will not alone assure a condition of human responsibility.

We should hope that neither philosophical inquiry, nor Art, nor Science is dead, as rumored. In addition to political reformation, public broadcasting will need to be enriched by each of these modes of inquiry and creative expression. Our capacities for system building, organization, and logistics are unquestioned. That pragmatism reveals its dark

side, however, when action is split off from its base in values. The dark side of efficiency is the oppression of bureaucracy. The dark side of television professionalism is the perfect transmission of banality. Without philosophical and spirited inquiry into the meaning of Being, public broadcasting is left with only crude behavioral and financial measurements of the public interest.

It is insufficient to say that the public interest consists in what is interesting. What is merely interesting to us is not necessarily in our best interest. Nor are we comfortable with the notion that an elite can know what is really in our best interest, regardless of our wishes and feelings. Neither can we claim that the public interest consists simply of a fair representation of various ideologies and world views as stated by powerful economic, racial, and class interest groups within the society. Nor does the public interest lie in strict and faithful accountability to sources of funding and political legitimacy. Even the sum total of all these measurements and standards will not enable us to fully participate in the search for meaning.

To all of these must be added the painful, exhausting and often lonely struggle to make form — form, capable of expressing feeling. In television, it is to produce a sight generative of insight. If public broadcasting can move from formats to form, it may begin to provide us not simply with programs but <u>experience</u>. Because programs and formats

provide us with a predictable organization of time and a known classification of events, we feel safe and unchallenged. This permits us to feel in control. But, it is really we who are the controlled.

What is at stake in the evolution of public broadcasting is the creative life of the mind. The mind which makes form out of chaos and the mind which works away at absurdity. There is no guarantee we will find meaning, and no alternative to trying.